

*the HANDSOME GIRL
& her BEAUTIFUL BOY*

**THE HANDSOME
GIRL &
HER BEAUTIFUL
BOY** *b.t.
gottfred*

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*dedicated to everyone
who has embraced their own
unique, magical mix
of feminine & masculine
(and olux and xulo)
and then
embraced everyone else's
in return*

-A,Z&b.t.

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author's note

(Actually this is the Author's Note ABOUT the Author's Note. For reasons I can't explain at this exact place in your reading experience, I decided to put the Author's Note at the end of the book. If curiosity demands you read it first, it's on page 397. I promise neither I, Zee, or Art will judge. We like you exactly the way you are.)

Part One

MYTHICAL
CREATURES
MEET ^{AT}
A
PIZZERIA

ZEE

Listen, let's start with a list.

1. Everyone at school thinks I'm a lesbian. I'm not. Wish I was (sometimes, maybe) but I'm not.
2. Everyone feels sorry for me because my mom's dying. Don't.
3. My real name is Rebecca. But no one calls me that. Ever. Everyone calls me Zee. Don't ask.
4. Honestly, I don't even remember what four was going to be.
5. My mom taught me to love everyone. So I do. But I really don't like anyone.

Okay, I like one person.

Cam.

Isn't the word "like" lame? Yeah, it is.

But I can't think of a better one, so fuck it.

Disaster!

I don't even know why I thought that. Perhaps the universe is communicating in mysterious ways.

Or I'm bored.

I should *probably* do my physics homework, but instead I'm going to read your mind (just trust me on this). I can sense you're probably wondering, "Art, how can someone so witty and interesting like you be so lonely?"

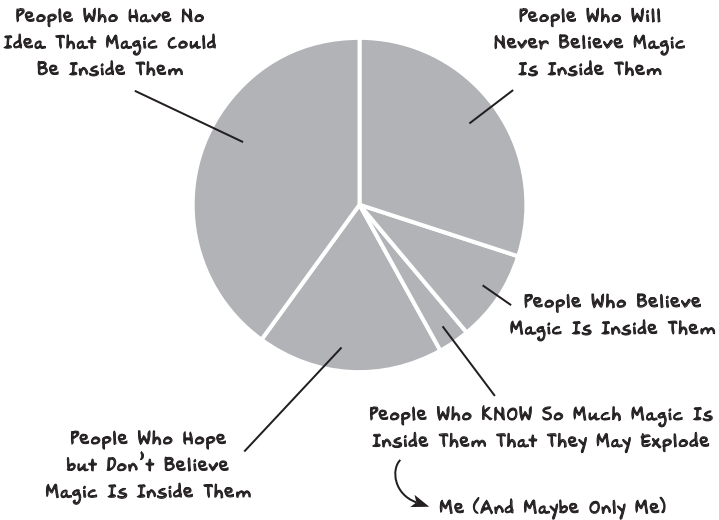
The answer is, I plan to change this very soon.

How do I know this?

Because I know magic!

I'm kidding. I don't know magic.

I *am* magic. You'll see. Ha.



ZEE

So, yeah, I like Cam.

He's my best friend.

He's been my best friend since we played travel baseball together back in grade school.

We text all the time. I'll text him right now:

ME

Yo dude—usual time for our monday pizza?

So when I say I like him, what I probably mean is I might be in love with him.

Wish I wasn't.

CAM

you got it dude

Cam has no idea about my feelings. ("Feelings" is as lame a word as "like.") I should tell him. I don't want to, but I should. Because, listen, he's got a girlfriend. *Abigail*. She's nice to me. I secretly hate her.

“ART!” my sister Abigail yells from downstairs because everyone in my family loves yelling. My dad yells, my mom yells, my brother, Alex, yells, and my two other sisters, Amy and Alice, do too. All our names begin with “A.” Oh, and our last name is Adams.

Isn’t that cute? Um, NO, IT’S NOT! It’s the most boring and annoying disaster in the history of boring and annoying disasters!

“WHAT?!” I yell back, because I’ve been brainwashed. I’m the youngest, the baby, the one nobody really notices. I’m feeling needy, which is boring, so I’m over it.

“DINNER!” Abigail yells again. She’s a junior and I’m only a year behind her, but she acts like she’s *so* mature. Everyone at Riverbend loves her but only because they don’t have to share a bathroom with her. I’m hilarious. But, seriously, go to college already, Abigail. Her boyfriend, Cam, told her that I’m gay because I don’t play any sports. Isn’t it more gay to get sweaty with a bunch of guys and then take showers together? I’m kidding. I like to make jokes that I only tell to myself.

ZEE

Maybe I shouldn't tell Cam. Telling him would be even more stupid than not telling him. Instead, I should just say something like—

A voice behind me: "Cam, I love you soooooo much. Please dump Abigail because I'm soooooo much smarter and more interesting and more beautiful."

I slap my phone to my chest, spin from back to butt on my bed, and face her. She loves to sneak into my room when I do my "stare at the ceiling" thing, as she calls it. "Hi, Mom," I say, but I say it like I mean, *You suck*.

"Don't be mad at me. Stand up and give me a hug. I could be dead by tomorrow." My mom's been saying crap like this since I was ten. It's funny. Sometimes.

I do as she says. My mom is this tiny thing, like a fairy if she had wings, and I'm this tall thing, but our bodies fit just right when we hug. My chin on her head, her head against my neck. Connected so there's no separation. And she's super pale and my skin's super dark, so we're almost that yin-and-yang symbol. That's weird to say. I guess I'm saying we're more than just mom and daughter. We are two halves to a whole that occasionally spend time apart. After our hug, I say, "I've decided I'm not going to tell Cam."

"That's a good idea. Much better to spend your life regretting not telling him."

"Yeah, yeah." I plop back to the edge of the bed. "If I tell him . . . and he doesn't like me back, then it will be awkward and I'll lose my best friend."

Mom sits next to me. "Darling . . . I'm sure after I'm dead, you'll be like, 'My mom died! Telling boys I love them is so easy compared to that!'"

"I'm sure."

"See? I'll be the best mom even in the afterlife."

"You will be." I almost—*almost*—get sad. But then I let it go. Because, listen, my mom's had cancer on and off since I was three. Being sad she has

cancer would be like being sad she's got brown hair. It is what is. Yeah, it's stage four now. But it's been stage four for two years and she keeps looking healthier. She'll probably outlive me.

"I'm going to lie down. Have fun not telling your feelings to Cam over pizza." Yeah, yeah. We slap five and she leaves.

I lie on my bed and go back to obsessing over Cam. Screw that. Stupid girls obsess over boys. I contemplate. Yeah. Contemplate.

And contemplating boys sucks, so I'm going to watch TV.

art

“OH MY GOD, ART!” Abigail says as she throws open my bedroom door.
“DINNER!”

I leap to my feet and tap-dance on the carpet because I’m a crazy person, then spin and slide on one knee in front of her with my arms out wide. Maybe I should be a choreographer on Broadway.

“YOU’RE SO WEIRD!”

“Thank you,” I say. “Do you want to see my latest Art Chart?”

“Not even a little bit. And don’t annoy Mom or Dad over dinner because if you do, they won’t let me go meet Cam and then I’ll have to hate you forever.”

“Don’t you have homework?” asks Michael when he finds me watching the Bulls game in the living room. Michael is my mom’s boyfriend. (Michael Trust is his full name. If that last name sounds made up, it’s because it is.) They grew up in Gladys Park together. He was the football captain, she was the head cheerleader . . . and she wanted nothing to do with him until stage four hit. She explained back then that “I always liked my men a little weird, and Michael, well, is very normal and maybe we need normal and boring right now.”

I tell him, “Did it.” Which is true. School has always been super easy for me. Everything has always been easy for me. Except getting Cam to think of me in a non-friend way. (“Non-friend” might be lamest of all.)

“Your mom’s resting?” he asks. I nod. “Are you hungry? I’ll make some pasta.”

“Going to dinner with Cam like I do every Monday.”

“You shouldn’t go out on a school night, Rebecca.” Michael tries to pretend he’s my dad but I spent my whole life without a dad, so why the hell does he think I need one now?

“I appreciate your advice, Michael, but I’m cool.”

“Rebecca . . .” And fuck him for always calling me Rebecca when he knows I hate it. I raise the volume on the TV. He marches over and snaps the controller out of my hands.

“It frustrates me that you don’t respect me.”

“I respect you, Michael.” Sort of. He let us move into his big house, and he pays the lease on my truck even though he said girls shouldn’t drive trucks.

“Can we please come to an understanding while your mother is still with us?”

And, yeah . . .

I get up, pat him on the shoulder with a “you’re an insensitive idiot” nod

of my head, then leave the house. Michael likes to think he needs to prepare me for my mom being gone. Like I haven't been to a thousand doctors' appointments, or seen her go bald twice, or noticed both her boobs were chopped off. People's sympathy is annoying enough, but having to deal with his or anyone's condescending tone makes me want to punch them in the face.

Per Adams family law, the parental figures are already eating in front of the television. It wasn't so bad when everyone was still at home, because you can't keep five kids quiet no matter how much Dad screams, but now that only Abigail and I still live here, it is depressingly dull. Dad watches his sports, Mom plays Scrabble on her phone, Abigail texts her friends, and I wonder if the universe screwed up by having me born on planet Earth.

It's Monday, so it's Boston Market day. Chicken, bacon loaded mashed potatoes, and macaroni and cheese. I'm a vegetarian. "How can you not like meat and be a man?" Dad asked when I explained to them at twelve that I would no longer be eating the dead flesh of animals. I offered to be the family chef and cook out-of-this-world dishes like mushroom and asparagus risotto. "Oh, Art, why do you have to always make everything so difficult?" my mom said.

I heat up some leftover broccoli and mix it in with the mac and cheese, sit next to my dad, and ask him questions about the basketball game so that he can pretend we have anything in common. He is this large, large, super-large man, over six foot five with baseball mitts for hands and a gut full of carbs and fried meat and cheap beer, and I'm not even five nine and would have to eat milk shakes every hour for a month to add on two pounds. He's some kind of manager at Allstate, and if you asked me, *Hey, Art, do you believe in hell?* I'd say, *Yes, it's middle management at an insurance company!* But I hate being negative about my parents. They're just parents and they seem sure of themselves and their life choices, so *Go do your thing, Mom and Dad! Eat your fast food! Watch your sports! Count your money! You be you! Just let me be me!*

ZEE

When I get to Penelope's Pizzeria, I just walk in and sit in the back at our usual table. Cam and I have been coming here every week since he learned to drive. The hostess comes over and drops off menus even though she knows we never look at them. Her name is Pen. Her dad owns this place. Pen's a chick in my class who I always thought was a bitch until she started dating the biggest dork in school over Christmas break, which is so fucking bizarre it actually makes me want to become friends with her. Now I sound like a bitch. Can't think about this now. Cam. I need to concentrate on Cam. . . .

Maybe my mom was right? Maybe I'll regret not telling Cam more than I'll regret telling him. So why not just do it tonight, right? Yeah, what the hell. Junior year will be over in six weeks; high school will be over in a year. Be pretty stupid to wait any longer.

When Abigail is done eating, she says to my parents, “I need the car. I’m going to see Cam.”

“Absolutely not,” my dad says. But it’s a ten-beer night, not a five-beer night, so it’s more like a phlegmy, gurgley “absowooley not.”

“Only if you take Art,” my mom follows, then gives a look to my dad that says, *We can have sex if both kids are out of the house*. My parents are boring and don’t talk about much with each other besides food and money, but if my mom’s having a four-glasses-of-wine night, they are pretty much guaranteed to go at it. That’s probably how they got stuck with five kids even though they’re both incompetent parents.

“Yeah, okay,” my dad says, “take Art and you can go.”

“I’m not taking Art on my date with my boyfriend!”

“THEN YOU’RE NOT GOING, ABBY!” My dad is the king of the yelling Adamses. He always gets his way by screaming, so I don’t know why he’d ever stop.

“Ugh, fine! We are leaving in two minutes, Art!” My sister stomps off. I wait for my parents to ask me if I actually want to go on my sister’s date, but only because I like to wait for things that are never going to happen. “AAAAAART!” Abigail yells after noticing I hadn’t moved.

“Were you talking to *meee*, sister?” I say, because I’m hilarious.

“You’re so annoying! Mom!”

“Don’t be annoying, Art.” Mom always takes her side.

Robot voice? Yesssss: “I. Am. Sorry. Did. Not. Mean. To. Disobey. Orders. Standing. Walking. To. Car. Will. Wait. For. Further. Instructions.”

“MOOOOOOM!”

Like I said, hilarious. Too bad I’m the only one who thinks so.

ZEE

“You already ordered?” Cam asks as he walks toward our table.

“Of course,” I say as he sits across from me and does our usual fist-bump greeting. Cam’s got great hands. Big, strong hands. And shoulders. And legs. And everything. I sound like a chick. I am a chick. But I hate sounding like one. Listen, okay, Cam’s hot. Not pretty-boy hot. But hot like a man should be hot. Like he could wrestle grizzly bears. Push cars up mountains. That sort of shit. I also dig that he doesn’t care how he dresses. Who wants a guy who cares how they dress? And Cam really doesn’t care. Wears the same zip-up jacket for a week, same jeans for a month, and the same Cubs hat since I gave it to him two Christmases ago.

In the three seconds it takes him to settle into the booth and look up at me, I think about just blurting out, *Dude, I’m kind of in love with you.*

I wouldn’t have said that.

Never could say that.

But that would be the coolest way to do it, right? Like it’s a casual thing, like I’m totally comfortable about being in love with him and don’t need anything from him but for him to know. But, yeah, listen, that’s never going to happen. He’s been my best fucking friend since I was ten. You can’t just say something like that without preparing the guy. Preparing myself. I don’t know. But, see, even before I could say anything else, Cam says, “Abigail’s going to join us. Hope that’s cool.”

Not cool at all. *Az. All.* But it wouldn’t be cool to not say it was cool, so I have to say, “Yeah, it’s cool.”

He says, “She gets jealous of our pizza dinners.”

She does? That’s good, right? If Abigail . . .

with her curves,

with her high heels to high school,

with her big lips and big eyes,
with her flirty 24-7 voice,
. . . could be jealous of my tall, flat-chested, tomboy ass, that's something,
right? Maybe Cam talks about me a lot when they're alone. Yeah. Maybe he
talks about all the things I am that Abigail could never be.

“BABY!” a shrieky, hyperfeminine voice launches across the restaurant.
Abigail. Beautiful Abigail. Beautiful fucking Abigail.

“What’s up, babe?” Cam says as he stands. She jumps into his arms, kissing
him all over the neck like he has just returned from some war. Like they
haven’t seen each other in years instead of hours. I wouldn’t even know how
to do that. Jump in a man’s arms. Let him twirl me and hold me like that.
Maybe I have to learn.

“Art?” says Cam to the kid I am just now noticing standing behind
Abigail. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Abigail, trying to pretend the kid doesn’t exist, says, “My parents made
me bring him. Sorry.”

“It’s cool. Art’s cool,” says Cam.

“He’s in a mood. I apologize in advance.”

“Zee, you ever meet Abigail’s younger brother?”

art

Have you ever seen a mythical creature that everyone says doesn't exist but then you see it and you're like *They're real! They're real!* Of course you haven't. No one has because otherwise they wouldn't be mythical.

BUT!

I saw one. I'm seeing one right now. I mean, I have seen her in the halls a few times and in the stands at a couple of Cam's baseball games, but I have never seen her up close. I have never touched her. I have never felt her energy so purely. And now that I have, you just have to believe me, this girl named Zee is a mythical creature and she is even more beautiful and magical than that.

I'm sure everyone at school thinks she's boring or ugly or a lesbian, but she transcends beauty, with her big cheekbones and thin face and long neck and eyelashes that would be a mile long if she even acknowledged she had them. She is—what's the word?—oh, yes, she's androgynous but not in an unsexy way. In a way that every boy AND girl should find mesmerizing. I'm going to become a photographer so I can say I discovered her and get her out of that hoodie and those cargo pants and put her in loose dresses over her toned body, add a dash of makeup just to highlight what is already perfect, and then have the world scream, *She's magnificent!* And I will scream back, *I know! I know!*

“No,” I say as I stand to face Abigail’s kid brother straight on. And he is a kid. I think a sophomore. But a *young* sophomore. His face is just so . . . pretty. Like he had never gotten a zit in his life, or a sunburn, or even a bad cold. You know what he looks like? Like he belongs in a boy band. My cousin Malinda used to have pictures of those bands all over her walls. She was twelve and I was probably six, but even then, I was like, “How can you be in love with them? They look and sound like girls.” And Malinda said, “They’re gorgeous like girls and that means they’ll be sensitive and good listeners like a girl but also they’re still boys and that makes them perfect.”

As we shake hands, this kid, this pretty boy, this Art, he pulls me in closer to him with this funny little smile and says, “And now your life will never be the same.”

“See?” Abigail says. “He’s in a mood. PLEASE ACT NORMAL, Art!” I’ve never heard Abigail yell like that. She was always so sweet and cute and harmless. (Harmless besides standing in the way between me and Cam.) But her brother got to her. Which was awesome.

“Sorry, sister, I’ll try to conform to standard human operating procedure for the rest of the evening.”

And I fucking laugh. I can’t even help it. I never laugh. (Well, except at my mom’s stupid death jokes. But besides her, never. I just don’t.)

“YOU’RE JUST GOING TO ENCOURAGE HIM, ZEE!”

“Yes, Zee,” Art says, “you’re only going to encourage me.” And then he winks right at me. No one has ever winked at me before. Not like that. Such a bizarrely confident wink. If he wasn’t so young, and if I wasn’t one hundred percent sure he was gay, I’d almost think he was hitting on me. But that’s impossible. He’s a pretty boy who likes boys, and I’m a tomboy who might not even know I like chicks. But who the hell cares why he winked, right? He made me laugh. So I wink back.

art

She winked back. BACK!

My whole body is tingling all over and I'm thinking I've just met my future girlfriend and probably the other half of my soul and we're going to live in a castle in the sky of another dimension and be king and queen and rule over advanced beings who worship us even though we insist everyone is equal. Oh-my-god, my thoughts are fireflies on fast-forward in Crazy Town. Slow, slow, sloooooooooooooow down.

BUT I JUST CAN'T!

"Zee, oh, my gosh, Zee, I have to ask you something," I blurt out even though she, Cam, and Abigail are talking about something else.

"Yes, Art," she says, and she smiles and I can tell she never smiles but she smiles at me, which I think means she loves me. I mean, she probably doesn't know it yet, not like I know I love her, but she'll know it eventually.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" I ask, because, let's face it, that is happening right this second.

Zee laughs. I just love her laugh. Seriously, it is the best laugh ever. Not fake or tired or like it laughs at just anything, but a unique laugh, a special laugh. Yes, a special laugh that has to be earned by someone special like me.

"Art, dude," Cam says, "you're acting like you're on drugs."

"He's like this all the time at home. It's such a nightmare," Abigail says.

Do you know what my future girlfriend says? This is what: "I think Art's super cool." *Super cool*. She basically just told me she loves me as much as I love her, right? Yes, duh! I need her number. I need to be able to talk to her and text her and see her every second of every day. That's insane. Don't be insane, Art.

"Can I have your phone number?" Sorry. I had to. I can't be stopped.

She laughs AGAIN, and then she asks with this really knowing glint in her infinite brown eyes, "Why do you want my phone number, Art?"

And because she is acting so bold and mesmerizing, I decide to just say it: “So I can make you fall in love with me.”

“Art! STOP MAKING EVERYTHING A JOKE!” Abigail yells because she doesn’t really know how to handle me any other way. But Zee would, wouldn’t she? She would. She doesn’t laugh this time. Maybe because she knows I am serious.

“Art,” Cam starts, “for real now, buddy, let’s just settle down and be chill for the rest of dinner.”

“But, Cam, *buddy*”—I love messing with him—“it’s hard to contain myself when I’ve just met the greatest love of my life.”

“All right, cool, but now we’re going to talk like normal people.” Cam is normal. Abigail is normal.

“But Zee and I aren’t normal. We are special and cannot be bothered with your boring normal-people talk.”

“SERIOUSLY, Art!” It’s Cam that yells this time. He has never yelled at me. “Zee is my best friend, and you’re making this weird for her.”

“He isn’t making this weird for me,” Zee says. See? Special.

“Zee,” Cam says, “I know you try to be accepting of everyone, but he’s making fun of you.”

“How’s he making fun of me?”

“Yes,” I say, “how am I making fun of her?”

Abigail butts in. She likes to butt in. Stupid buttface butter-inner. “Because you know you two are like polar opposites. So you’re making a joke out of it.”

“We are *not* polar opposites,” I start, in almost a serious voice because I am starting to realize they really can’t see how perfect Zee and I are for each other. “We are the opposite of opposites.” Zee laughs again. She can’t help finding me hilarious.

Cam says, “I don’t even know how this started, Art, but Zee would never be into you and you know you’d never truly be into her or any other ‘her.’”

Cam just said I was gay. Out loud. In front of my future girlfriend and my sister. Everyone’s pretending he didn’t say it, but he did.

And, I mean, let’s be serious, I dress well, I don’t really like sports, I like

almost all creative endeavors, and my best friend Bryan *is* gay. And I think most gay people are so much more interesting than most straight people! So, okay, I get it. No denial of how the world perceives this soul.

And even though I love Cam for saving Abigail after biggest creep ever Will Safire left her in a thousand, tearful pieces, I honestly don't care that Cam thinks it. I don't care that anyone thinks it, really. I mean, aren't we all a little gay? Cam sweats and showers with guys, Abigail cuddles and confesses with girls, and I don't put labels on them. But the problem is, I don't want Zee to think that *I thought* I was gay.

But see . . . see, see, see . . . I thought that was the problem. *I thought* that was going to be my biggest obstacle now between my and Zee's great love affair. Afraid not. Because after I spent not even a full single second stressing over what she might think of me after Cam's statement, I notice this brokenhearted little girl inside Zee's eyes.

ZEE

Cam thinks I'm a lesbian, doesn't he?

He didn't exactly say it, but like I mentioned, I know a lot of people at The Bend think it. But they're all idiots, right? So what the hell do I care what they think? But if Cam thinks it . . . if the one person who knows me better than anyone besides my mom thinks I do like girls, or should like girls, or will like girls . . .

I mean, my brain just can't operate right now. Just one big block of fuck-me.

"Zee? Dude? What's wrong?" Cam says. "I didn't mean . . ."

"Nothing," I say. Nothing except the one dude I could ever really like thinks I like chicks.

art

Zee is in love with Cam.

She is. She is in love with her best friend and my sister's boyfriend. In love with a boy who used to bully Bryan and me in grade school. In love with a boy who truly is my polar opposite.

I guess that makes me wrong about everything. I know who I am and know who I like. If Zee could "like" someone like Cam, then she isn't the girl I dreamed her to be. She's not special like me. She's just not as good at being normal as people like Cam and Abigail.

So I turn my magic off. No reason to annoy normal people with it if it isn't going to amaze my mythical creature at the same time.

"Okay, I apologize," I say.

"Cool?" Cam says.

"Cool, dude," I say, mocking him a little because I can't help myself. But he doesn't notice.

"It's a trick," Abigail says.

"No trick," I say, "let's discuss the Riverbend Renegades baseball season with its star and captain, Cam Callahan. Or maybe we should preview the upcoming football season with its star and captain—what's his name?—Cam Callahan."

"Don't push it, punk," Cam says, ruffling my hair like I'm five years old. I was planning on pretending Zee barely existed for the rest of the dinner, only I can't help but notice her gazing down at her lap, either too ashamed about not defending me or too wrecked over her dream-man Cam not realizing she is in love with him.

But then—

—oh, goodness, but then—

She lifts her head and with it the phone from her lap. She slides it across the table toward me and winks—winks!—as she says, "My number."

ZEE

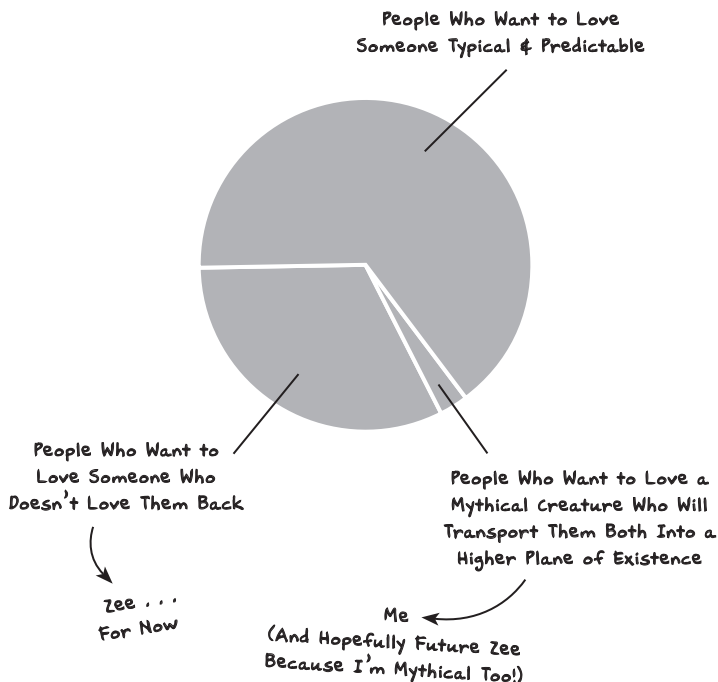
Listen, I don't know why I gave the kid my number. Maybe to piss Abigail off? Make Cam jealous? Why the hell that would make Cam jealous, I don't know. I probably did it because the kid was just out there—you know, different—and I'm sure enough people have ignored him or made fun of him and I didn't want to be another one of those people. Or maybe I hoped he'd make me laugh again. Who knows?

art

Okay, okay, okay. I see . . . don't you seeeeeeeeeee? Zee's not bad at being normal. No, no, no. That's not it at all. No, see, Zee truly is a mythical creature, but *she doesn't know* she's a mythical creature.

That would be like the only unicorn on earth walking to every corner of the planet, seeing every other living being and not seeing any other unicorns, and *still* not understanding they were special.

So, yes, Zee and Art's love affair will happen and it will be fabulous. But it will have to wait for now. First, see, I was going to have to find my unicorn a mirror so she could see how magical she was.



The rest of dinner isn't nearly as eventful as the first bit. Art does calm down a little, though he keeps looking my way even if Abigail or Cam is speaking. It feels like he's studying me. Like he wants to draw me or some crap like that. I don't even . . .

After we eat, Cam says, "Zee, you mind sitting here with Art for a while so I can talk to Abigail in my car?"

He doesn't want to talk to her; he wants a blow job. From the first time Abigail did it, he couldn't stop talking about how great she was at it. (I swear their relationship is based on those fucking blow jobs.) After the fifth time hearing too many details, I told him I'd rather shove a pencil through my eye than hear about her "oral talents" again. And right now, the last thing I want to do is sit in a restaurant while the boy I love is getting it on with his girlfriend out in the parking lot. But I can't say no. So I say, "Yeah, cool." Fuck me.

After they leave, Art gets this little grin on his face as he says, "They're not going to talk."

"Yeah, I know."

"Does he know?"

"Does who know what?"

"Does Cam know you're in love with him?"

My first instinct is to say, *What the fuck are you talking about, kid?* But I have told no one except my mom and my mom's awesome but she's an idiot when it comes to guys so I think what the hell and say, "No, he doesn't, and if you tell your sister I'll end you."

"I want to be your best friend, so of course I'll tell no one."

"You like saying stuff like that, don't you?"

"Like I want to be your best friend and make you fall in love with me?"

"Yes," I say.

"It's just so boring to say boring things. I like to not be boring."

“You’re definitely not boring, Art.”

The kid inhales a deep breath, catches it, and then blurts out, “You’re special.”

“Thanks?”

“So why would you fall in love with someone so not special like Cam?”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“I’m just saying . . .” Art starts.

“He’s my best friend, so don’t be an asshole and tell me he’s not special, because he is.”

I swear the kid almost cries. I feel bad even though he was the one who said the stupid thing.

“Listen, kid—I know you were trying . . .”

“Kid?” he says, and now, yeah, there is definitely water in the corners of his eyes. Crap. Before I can apologize, he says, “I have to use the bathroom.” And he leaves. He’s still in there when Abigail and Cam walk back inside with their faces flushed and her lips puffed out from, well, from whatever. I am exhausted from Art. From Cam. From my stupid “feelings.” So I pay the bill, and as soon as they’re back at the table, I stand up and say,

“Art’s in the bathroom and I’ve got to go.” They sort of say, “Cool,” but I’m not really listening anymore.

Once composure is regained, tears dried, and my face again impossible not to love (ha), I exit the pizzeria bathroom to find Zee gone. Tears threaten to return before I remember: I have her phone number! Then all I want to do is text Zee every fifteen seconds until she realizes that our encounter is the most important meeting in the history of the universe.

Knowing that this is a brilliant idea but also, possibly, a horrible one, I distract myself by texting Bryan while Abigail and Cam bicker in the front seat on the drive home:

ME

I'm in love

BRYAN

You fall in love every week, Art!

ME

Those were schoolboy crushes.

This is my first grown-up love.

BRYAN

You fell in love with the girl in the
Old Navy commercial last Thursday

True. That Old Navy girl *was* perfection. Like fantasy perfection you don't touch, only admire from afar. Zee is perfection meant to be held. Zee is so real it makes me fly.

But Bryan isn't going to understand for a million reasons but mostly because he's in love with me. We've had the conversation so many times. He

tells me he loves me. I tell him I love him too. He tells me he loves me *like that*. I tell him I like girls. He tells me I'm not being honest with myself. I tell him he's not being honest with himself that I simply don't like him *like that* back. He cries, runs off, doesn't talk to me for two days, and then texts me that he can't even remember why we're fighting. I pretend I don't either and we go back to being best friends.

Back at home, and still fighting the urge to stalk-text Zee, I instead text my sorta, kinda new BFF Carolina Fisher. She hunted me down at the end of our freshman year, basically begging to be my friend because her brother had just come out of the closet and she thought I was gay and, even though I told her I wasn't, I could tell she didn't believe me. But then she had a big, epic breakup with Trevor Santos and we were watching a movie and she's like, "Are you really not gay?" and I could tell she was lonely and she looked pretty and I needed practice kissing, so I kissed her. And it was . . . like making out with my twin sister without the scandalous excitement. Such a disaster. I didn't tell her that because that would be mean. We did go to homecoming together and it was fun but also a little awkward because I could tell she thought I was gay again but really we just had zero chemistry. (Which I couldn't say unless I was a jerk and I'm the nicest person ever!) So the reason she's only kinda, sorta my new best friend is because we don't really hang out in person anymore but we do text each other really intimate stuff like who we think about when we masturbate. So that's why all I had to text is:

ME

Zee Kendrick

And I know she'll know what that means.

CAROLINA

REALLY?

ME

Yes REALLY

CAROLINA

She's so . . . brooding

ME

I KNOW! It turns me on

CAROLINA

I liked when Trevor brooded

Oh, boy, she is having a “Trevor is my soul mate” pity party. Boring. So I tell Carolina she should just get back together with him already and then say I have to go even though I don't.

Because all I want to do, maybe ever again, is think about Zee. But the perfect text to win her heart for eternity has not yet formed! Maybe I should just go to sleep and send her one tomorrow after I've had more time to think about it.

Ha. Sleep. Not a chance.

ZEE

I fall asleep on the couch watching SportsCenter. Only wake up when I get this text:

UNKNOWN NUMBER

You're right, Cam's special and
everyone in the world is special but
you're so special it hurts my body

It's Art. The kid. I want to find what he wrote creepy. Or freaky. Or maybe just stupid. But no one's ever texted me stuff like that. I have really only dated two people ever. Two dudes from my CrossFit gym. Neither of them texted me anything besides *Want to come over and watch a movie?* Which meant come over and hook up.

I don't know if what the kid texted was romantic or poetic or dorky or maybe just super nice. Art is clearly confused and lonely. Not sure why he is latching on to me the way he is, but screw it, I like it. Who cares why I do?

So I text back:

ME

sorry for calling you kid

ART

I've decided you can call me kid as long as it
becomes your pet name for me when we make love :)

So weird!

Fuck it, I feel like being weird back.

ME

deal—what will your pet name be for me?

He doesn't text back right away and I feel like an idiot for playing along. But then:

ART

Sorry it took so long. But I had to make sure
I thought of the perfect pet name: my queen.

ME

your queen?

ART

Tell me you love it or I'll die.

I want to tell him it's stupid. That I should go back to sleep. But like everything with this kid, what I want to want and what I actually want are never the same.

ME

i love it

Part Two

THE OPPOSITE OF
OPPOSITES

art

Mom drives Abigail and me to school every day, but she usually makes business calls while she drives (she's a part-time salesperson at the Mercedes dealership in Hoffman Estates), so mostly Abigail looks at her phone in the front seat and I look into my heart for profound revelations in the backseat. I'm so interesting. I know! (Ignore me, please, I'm in a mood.)

But today Abigail leans into the back and says, "Cam told me to tell you not to bug Zee or he'll be mad."

"Zee and I are in love."

"Art! This is serious! Cam and Zee already are way too close and if he hates me because you harass her, then I'll hate you forever."

"I promise not to bug Zee."

"Thank you," she says, but she doesn't like my answer the more she thinks about it, so then she screams, "WHEN I SAY DON'T BUG HER, THAT MEANS DON'T CONTACT HER AT ALL FOR ANY REASON!"

"I love you, Abigail." Which I say in a voice that makes me sound so mature and her crazy, which confuses her so much she doesn't say anything the rest of ride.

Bryan is waiting for me at my locker like he always is before first period. For the record, my best friend is a horrible dresser, so anyone who thinks all gay people are fashionistas needs to meet more gay people. He's a bit big (he says fat) and is super self-conscious about it, so he wears big baggy khakis and bigger, baggier blue sweaters (always blue!) to hide his body. I tell him he's not overweight, he's strong, but then he asks why I'm not attracted to him and, "Let's move on already, Bryan!"

"I'm sorry for not taking your new girlfriend seriously," he says first thing today, and that is like the opposite of what I expect him to say.

“She’s not my girlfriend yet.”

He goes on, “But she will be when she gets to know you. Anyone who truly gets to know you and doesn’t love you is a moron.” Which is nice but also a little manipulative, so I ignore it and say, “I can’t wait for you to meet her.”

“Me neither.” And then Bryan punches me (hard!) in the shoulder because that’s how he shows affection but also because that’s how he shows me he wishes Zee was dead.

I texted Zee when I woke up but she hasn’t texted back by the time first period ends so I text her again but she still hasn’t texted me by lunch so then I text her six times in a row saying how sorry I am for texting so much only to realize this is like singing, *I’m sorry for singing!*

I tell myself to be patient, but then I tell myself patience is for people who didn’t meet their soul mate last night, so I go and find Cam and Abigail before they leave for Midnight Dogs.

“Is Zee okay?” I ask.

“I hate you,” Abigail says, but she says it under her breath because she has everyone in school convinced she’s not constantly on the edge of hysteria, which she so is.

“Art, bud, she’s fine. I know you think you two bonded last night, but you gotta remember she’s a junior and you’re a sophomore and she’s into sports and you’re not, so you two don’t really have anything to talk about.”

Boring. I say, “Just tell me she’s alive and not trapped under a large vehicle somewhere, and I’ll worry about what we talk about.”

They both shake their heads and ignore me and walk away, which is fine because I am done talking to them anyway.

ME

ZEE! MY LOVE! TELL ME WHAT ALIENS
KIDNAPPED YOU AND I’LL FIND THE
CLOSEST SPACESHIP TO COME FIND YOU!

This is too much. Why do I always have to be too much?

ZEE

you're hilarious

She's so in love with me, she can't even take it.

I go do CrossFit every day after school except Tuesday because on Tuesday my mom schedules her personal training clients so she always has the afternoon off. Michael has meetings (he does the church's finances), so from like three to eight, it's just me and her. Sometimes we do big things like go shopping downtown. (Mom tries to make me buy girly crap, but I always end up just getting another hoodie or workout thing.) Or we see a movie and get a large popcorn and dump peanut M&M's in it. But mostly it's low-key stuff. Her reading on the couch while I do homework on the floor. Or picking up Chinese food and then bingeing on Netflix. I like it all, the big or the small, because it's just me and her. My life has always been best when it's just me and her.

Today's going to be a special day. We're going to do a tour at Northwestern University. She wants me to go someplace exotic like California or Portland, but there's no way I'm going to school that far away from her. No way. Northwestern is a forty-minute drive. Plenty far for me.

She had been talking about this tour all weekend as if I was actually leaving for college today, so I expect her to have her purse in hand, psyching me up with some of her old cheerleader ra-ra, but when I walk in through the front door, the house is weirdly quiet.

I know she's home because her car is in the garage, so when I enter and it's silent, I freak out. My mom is *always* making noise, moving or talking or something, unless she's sleeping and she never slept during our Tuesdays.

And listen, I know it's coming, I know it is, I know my mom's going to die, but just because you know something's going to happen doesn't mean it can't freak you out.

"MOM!" I yell, and I almost never yell. When she doesn't respond, fuck, I yell so loud I expect the house to blow apart. "MOOOOOOOOOOMMMM!" I start running from room to room. Yelling. Yelling more. The last place I

go is her room because I always figure the place she would die would be her room and if she is going to be dead I want to wait as long as possible to find out. Yeah, I'm running, so maybe I should have crawled to make it last even longer, but nothing makes sense when you think your mom is dead.

And there she is, on her bed, her eyes closed, hands crossed over her stomach. She looks pretty, but a peaceful pretty and my mom is usually a high-strung pretty. Her makeup is perfect because it's always perfect. She is dressed in a suit for our tour. She never wears suits because she likes to be as girly as possible in dresses or spandex. The opposite of me basically. So the suit is for me, to impress whoever needs to be impressed at Northwestern.

But my mom . . . right now . . . is still. So still.

Too still . . .

"You think I'm dead, don't you?" she says, with her eyes still closed.

"AAAAAH!" I scream, and then run and jump onto the bed next to her. She laughs. Thinking she's so fucking funny. I am so pissed. And so happy. "That's not funny, Mom!"

"When I'm dead, you're going to think back on this moment and say, 'My mom was *so* funny.'"

"Why are you lying down? Are you tired? Do you want to skip the tour?"

"No! I'm fine. I'm *so, so* excited for this tour. First one on their feet wins." And damn, my mom sits up, swivels, and stands before I can even turn over. But by the time I'm up next to her, her breath gets short and she needs to sit back down on the bed.

I sit back down next to her and rub her back. Her wheezing is rough, deep, like an overweight man instead of her frail self, and it sounds like her lungs are gurgling water, even drowning. "We're not going," I say.

"We're going," she says.

"You can barely breathe!"

"I'm fine, Zee." And she puts her head on my shoulder and closes her eyes for one second before leaping back to her feet and pretending she is invincible yet again. "You go change and I'll meet you in the car in one minute."

"I'm wearing this," I say, pointing at what I wear every day. Hoodie (black today) and cargo pants (dark khaki green every day).

“No, you’re not. You’re wearing a dress.”

“HA!” I haven’t worn a dress in, man, I don’t even. Long fucking time.

“Then at least a blouse and nice jeans. And no gym shoes or boots.”

“This is a tour, Mom, not an interview.”

“This is a chance to make an impression, no matter how small. Go.” She pushes me out and closes her bedroom door behind me.

Fine. I’ll do it. For her. Listen, no way was I getting in a dress—did I even own one that fit anymore?—but if she’d put on a suit, I could do jeans and that white cashmere-y sweater from Banana Republic she got me. Fine.

I change fast. Feel stupid, like I’m pretending to be someone else, but whatever. I haven’t heard my mom open her door, so I fling it open and say, “Look how much your daughter loves you.”

She is still again. So still.

But this time crumpled on the floor.

art

After Zee tells me I am hilarious, I text her back that we should elope, and she sends me a wink back, which means she isn't taking me seriously. I mean, I *was* joking. Mostly anyway. But, oh, I can just feel in my heart that Zee is going to be my escape superjet out of this terribly boring and ill-fitting life I'm stuck in. I just know it! So I decide no more Zee texts until tomorrow. Or at least tonight. Or at least an hour from now.

Walking into the house after school, I find Abigail crying on the front stairs and I think, Yay, Cam broke up with her! But then I think if Cam had really broken up with her, she would be doing her overdramatic spectacle in front of everyone and not this small sob hidden away from my parents.

"What's wrong?" I ask, because maybe, just maybe, something really is wrong.

"Dad got fired," she says, and I'm not even sure my brain thought what she said was English. It was like she'd said, *Dad is a lizard and he just molted his human skin off.*

But then my head slowly deciphers the words, so I ask, "Where is he?"

"Watching TV." She sobs an epic sob, and I hug her to make sure her body doesn't come apart at the seams. Abigail hugs me back, and for a moment, we seem like siblings who actually like each other. When she seems to solidify, I tell her I'm going to check on Dad.

I drop to my knees, turn my mom over on her back. I have gotten certified in CPR and I am ready.

But she doesn't need it.

Breathing . . . she is breathing . . . barely . . . but enough. It's that same gurgling from before, except this time it is fast, shallow, faint. Super-fucking faint. Stage four cancer basically means her breast cancer has spread to other parts of her body. For my mom, the tumors in her chest wall are causing malignant fluid to fill the cavity around her lungs. Awesome, right? Yeah, right. So breast cancer in her lungs. It doesn't even make sense. She told me a few months ago—in her “isn't this funny?” way—that eventually she'd suffocate but not really know she was suffocating because of the pain medication. That can't be now, right? She isn't even on any pain meds right now, so it can't be. It just can't.

My phone is dialing 911 while my free hand strokes her hair and tells her it's going to be okay. I always wanted to be that person who didn't tell people it was going to be okay when I knew it wasn't. . . .

But she's my mom and I want her to be okay so much, I'd be any person anyone wanted me to be if she'd just be okay for a little while longer.

It doesn't get worse as we wait for the ambulance, but she can't talk, so we just lie on the floor next to each other. I stare in her eyes, memorizing every flicker inside of them. Every tiny movement. I convince myself as long as I look at her, she'll stay alive. Like a watched pot never boils. She tries to stare back but keeps losing focus. As if her eyes can't decide to look at this life or the next. So any time I see her pupils drift, I whisper, “I love you, Mom,” and she'll be able to concentrate on me for a moment or two. Then she smiles at me, just a bit, and squeezes my arm.

art

My dad is in his usual corner of the couch, feet propped on the coffee table, a beer in his hand and a bag of Doritos in his lap. His mouth and hands are pasted in that neon cheese. SportsCenter is on because SportsCenter is always on if no actual games are. Dad has this far-off gaze thing that makes me think his soul has left his body and all that's left is this empty shell.

"How are you doing?" I ask.

"Fine," he says, not turning away from the television.

"Can I make you a sandwich?" I ask. I don't even know why. I have never made my dad a sandwich or any food in my life.

"No."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not much to talk about, Art."

"I'm sure you'll get a better job now."

"Yeah," he says, but his "yeah" is more of a *my life is over*.

"Maybe the four of us should go out to dinner to make you feel better."

"Can't spend more money when you have less."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Art, I just need to be left alone."

"Oh, okay, sorry, Dad. I'll be in my room if you need me." I wait for him to say something else, but he just goes back to being a soulless shell and so I leave.

The paramedics arrive six minutes after I call. Which is great. But they break my eye contact with my mom—yeah, to save her, but what if it's my staying connected to her that's saving her?—and by the time I step up into the ambulance with her, she can't focus on me at all. Not even for a second or two. She only looks up and off, off to that other world. Or winces from the pain in this world. Like someone is hammering big stakes through her chest every other breath.

Should I tell her it's okay to go? She's fought this disease fourteen years now. All for me. I should. Listen, I'll be alone, but isn't that better than my mom always fighting? Always in pain?

"Mom . . ." I start. Not crying. But my voice isn't steady. "Mom . . . you . . . stay with me. Okay? I don't want you to go. I don't want you to go."

I know I should've said she could move on. *I know*. But I don't want her to move on. Isn't that okay that I don't want my mom to die? Ever. Someone please tell me it's okay. Please.

Even at three, I didn't smile a whole lot. Yeah, I know some kids see their parents are depressed and try to cheer them up. But I was the opposite. My mom had all this crap happening to her, all this horrible luck, and all she'd do was make jokes and say stuff like "No biggie, kiddo." That was her favorite thing to say to me every time I got upset about her cancer coming back or some jerk guy dumping her. So I thought it was my job to be serious for her. I'd tell the doctors, "If you don't make my mom better, I'll kill you." I didn't say it cute. Said it dead fucking straight. Really. And I'd give them the best evil eye any little kid has ever given. When she was cancer free for a few years, and dating, I'd do the same to her boyfriends. "If you hurt my mom, I'll kill you." And evil eye them until they laughed uncomfortably and Mom

told me to be nice. *Screw being nice* is what I used to think. If the world isn't nice to you, you shouldn't be nice back.

When I was ten, my mom's cancer returned for the second time. I wanted to blow up the planet. The whole fucking thing. In fact, I stomped around the house screaming, "I'M GOING TO BLOW UP THE FUCKING PLANET!" The type of screaming that turns your face purple.

My mom waited for me to exhaust myself, then steered me over to our tiny kitchen table in our (pre-Michael) tiny one-bedroom apartment. She said, "Zee . . . cancer's not fun. A lot of things that happen aren't that fun. But you're getting old enough now that I think you can work on not being angry all the time."

"I like being angry all the time!"

"I know you do." She laughed. She liked to defuse my rage sometimes with her chirpy fairy laugh.

"Because things suck all the time!"

Mom then said, "How about if I told you that you working on your anger might help me fight cancer?"

I said nothing. Just sat there and stewed.

"You're right. A lot of sucky things happen. And you and I may have gotten more than our fair share."

"WAAAAAAAY more!" Purple face was back.

Mom continued with her big lecture, and even though that day I barely registered what she was saying while she was actually saying it, I really didn't forget any of it. Weird, I know. She said: "To deal with all these sucky things that happen in life, people try all sorts of things. Some work a lot or get a big hobby so they are too busy to think about the bad stuff. Church has helped me and a lot of others find peace when things become hard. And almost everyone uses things like TV or food or alcohol or drugs to distract themselves from the sucky things. Which is fine too as long as you don't distract yourself so much that you don't want to do anything else besides distract yourself. And you, Zee, you're addicted to distracting yourself using anger . . ."

"But, Mom . . ." I said, not yelling. More quiet. Like I knew she had a point but still had to argue with her anyway.

". . . but being angry about things being sucky is self-fulfilling because if

you're so busy being angry, how are you going to look for things that might make you happy? And if you're so good at being angry, why are nice, fun people going to want to spend time with you? So of course things will keep staying sucky!" She tried to pretend this was funny. It wasn't. But then my mom hugged me and made us grilled cheese with tomatoes, which was my fave then, and that day became my fave forever.

You can't tell your parents lectures work or they'll do it all the time, but that lecture worked. Not like I became this fake, smiley person suddenly. But I stopped hating every person I met. I tried to talk to other kids like they might be my friends and not just ignorant idiots.

That summer is when I met Cam. And listen, my mom is right. When I let myself have a friend, someone I could have fun with, it was easier not to be angry all the time. I guess I'm thinking about this now because it's not like my mom is just this nice person who feeds me and clothes me and drives me places. She's got super-wise insights. And I want her around to give me more insights. About college and jobs and Cam. I want her here. Please.

Once at the hospital, a nurse directs me to the waiting room while they wheel my mom back into the emergency department. I try to argue, not really with words, but the nurse says, "We will bring you back there as soon as she's stabilized."

Can't sit, too much energy, so I hover near the admitting desk. Text Cam:

ME

At the hospital with my mom

He doesn't respond right away. Which sucks. Sucks. Sucks. Sucks. So I text Michael just to have something to do. Michael responds fast. Which is cool I guess. Says he is on his way. I keep looking at my phone, waiting for Cam to text back or call or maybe just show up. Wouldn't that be the best thing to ever happen? If Cam just strolled into the emergency room and then saw me from across the lobby. Without words, he'd be saying, *I'm here for you, Zee.*

If he showed up like that, I think I would run up and jump into his arms. Yeah, I totally would.

art

The one positive of my dad losing his job and our family possibly ceasing to exist is that I don't obsess over Zee every second.

Every other second?

Yes, duh, ha.

I finally text her again around seven. Which is basically a world record.

She doesn't text back.

But I'm a much more mature person than I was this morning, so I'm not going to text her again until after she texts me. Unless she doesn't text me back in the next ten minutes.

Cam doesn't show up. No jumping into a boy's arms today.

Michael does show and does his grown-up thing and talks to the nurse. Doesn't do any good, but it's cool he did it.

Three hours. That's how long we have to wait. Michael makes business calls, but all I can do is just stand there. Yep. Nothing else. Don't really think anything either. Sometimes you want something to happen so much you can't do anything but wait for it to happen.

So three hours. The doctor first explains that they have opened her chest to release some of the fluid buildup in her lungs, which regulated her breathing. "So she's stable," the doctor explains, "but sleeping. The surgery and the pain medication will probably keep her resting through the night. But you can go see her."

A nurse then leads us back to the patient rooms. Michael and I both walk through the door to her room, and I expect her to look like she did when I walked into her bedroom after school. But now she's ghost white, drool down her chin, mascara smeared across her face, the hospital gown jagged across her left shoulder. Tubes and wires sprout from her body. My mom looks sicker than I've ever seen her, even the chemo days.

I grab a towel from the bathroom, get it wet, and wipe her face clean of the drool and makeup. After cleaning her up, tightening the gown, straightening out her blanket, I kiss her on the head. *Love you, Mom*, I say without saying it.

"I'll sleep on the chair here," I say.

"No, you are going home to get a good night's sleep," Michael says in his boss voice.

"One person can stay, but not two," the nurse says. "I'll let you two work it out." Then she leaves.

“I’m staying.” I fire my evil eye. He gets the message.

“Okay, okay . . .” he stammers. “You call me if anything changes. I’ll come back in the morning so you can go to school.”

No chance I’ll be going to school tomorrow but no reason to argue with Michael on that point now. He tries to hug me before he leaves, but I look in the other direction and he gets the hint, says good-bye, and leaves.

Cam has finally texted me back:

CAM

Zee, so sorry about your mom—Thinking of ya

I’m sure he had been lifting weights or maybe hanging out with Abigail. But three hours is a long time to wait for your best friend to respond when your mom is dying. And then to not say, *I’m on my way*, or even *Can I do anything?* or any *fuckin’* thing besides the most pointless thing in the universe. *Thinking of ya.* HOW DOES THAT HELP ME? WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO WITH YOUR THOUGHTS, CAM! I want you here! I want you trying to hug me! I want you to love me like I love you!

Fuck me, I’m such a loser.

I go to type something back, something normal like *Thanks*, but my phone dies. FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCCCCCKKKKK
KKKKKK.